

Appraisal sample 1

Editing notes

I like the characters, enjoyed the plot, and was interested by the themes, but some aspects of the storyline confused me or I found that they were flat and lacked tension.

I'm not usually one for a prologue, but you've used it effectively. It introduces the character's goal, and (in one page, well done!) creates sympathy for the character leading into the beginning of the story, which is valuable because not everyone can connect with someone who [REDACTED].

Because it's not finished, I don't know whether or not all the loose ends tie up, so the below notes are based on my understanding of what I've read. There are elements that I think can be brought together to create a tighter story, and some things that can be expanded or added to increase tension and reader interest.

Story

I'm not clear on what the story goal is. The character has his goal, [REDACTED], and he succeeds; however, he is told that he is going on this journey because he needs guidance and because he needs to redeem himself. This is pretty vague, and leaves me wondering about the following:

- I don't know why he needs guidance or redemption. What's he done that's so bad?
- I don't know how he's supposed to redeem himself. [REDACTED] says he's showing no signs of attempting to redeem himself, but what opportunity has he had?
- I don't know why he gets this opportunity. Some people do some bad things; what's singled him out to have this chance to [REDACTED]?
- [REDACTED] says there's no one else to guide him. Why is this? Is everyone else guiding his or her own charge? If so, what makes the character think he can go back to [REDACTED] and tell everyone about [REDACTED]? What makes him think he'll be believed?
- I don't know how his mother was able to ask [REDACTED] to guide him; she didn't seem able to communicate effectively.
- Apart from determining [REDACTED], I don't know what the character has to lose or gain. I don't really know what he's supposed to learn or how he's supposed to apply it to his life.
- I don't know what stands in the way of him redeeming himself because I don't know how he's supposed to do it.
- [REDACTED] says the point is for the character to redeem himself for his mother's sake; what does she have to lose or gain?

Protagonist

The character wants to know where his mother is; however, he seems to be pretty aware that [REDACTED], which made me wonder if there was something else behind the question that isn't suggested in the prologue.

This was supported by the fact that the 'where' is answered very early in the story. It suggests that he has more to gain from actually seeing her. However, he says that his sense of closure is a result of finally knowing where she is, so it feels as though the climax was not all it was set up to be.

I think this is a good opportunity to tie the character's goal and one of the themes together. He seems, to me, to have doubts about whether or not [REDACTED], despite seeming to be aware that [REDACTED]. The unfairness of [REDACTED] is a recurring theme, so it made sense to me for the character to feel as though [REDACTED] was justified, or even just that the punishment doesn't fit the crime. Perhaps this can be introduced in the story as motivation?

This doesn't change the direction of the story, it just connects some things that feel natural to be connected, and strengthens the character's need to have his question answered. It also sets up for the character to be spurred on in his journey after seeing his mother, because the [REDACTED] would suddenly become very personal for him. He'll dive back into his journey with new fire.

He gets closure by finding out where she is and by seeing her, but what does he have to lose? Giving him something to lose and making this loss creep closer will give the story more tension. This could just be internal conflict, e.g. maybe's he's realising he's not ready to see her again, or maybe he's terrified to [REDACTED] and has a moment where he decides he's not going to go through with it.

Themes

I've already talked about the [REDACTED] and how it can be used to complicate the character's goal and the story goal, but there's another recurring theme that I find fascinating, and it would be interesting to see it expanded upon: [REDACTED].

The character talks about it on and off, and goes into more detail in [REDACTED], but here he only really addresses [REDACTED]. I've written a note on this page that [REDACTED] could be included, but I think there are other areas of society that could also be included [REDACTED].

The only problem with this is that I don't know how relevant it is. If the reason the character is on this journey has something to do with the enlightenment of humanity then it is definitely relevant, but if it's just personal redemption, then it's probably not, which is a shame because this is part of the story that has really stuck with me.

Appraisal sample 2

Writing

To connect with the character, the reader really needs to experience what he's thinking and feeling. Give him something else to think about, or have him rationalise his unsettling thoughts in a way that convinces the reader to push them aside as well. This could be things such as stress about starting high school. Something that is big enough for him to dwell on to an extent that he's convinced he's being paranoid.

When [REDACTED] sees [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] the first time, he spends a few paragraphs describing what they look like/are wearing, and how he met them, and I don't really care about any of that. Additionally, it's not likely that [REDACTED] would be thinking about it at the time. He wouldn't approach his friends actively thinking about what they're wearing unless there's something that particularly catches his attention. It's best to reveal these details in a realistic way. For example, he could notice [REDACTED]'s shirt and say, "Dude, do you ever wash that shirt?". The way they met could possibly be revealed in a conversation between [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], which would fuel the conflict. The same thing happens with [REDACTED] and, to a lesser extent, [REDACTED].

Characters

Protagonist [REDACTED]

Motivation

He is motivated to achieve his goal by the love he has for his friends. The reader would benefit from experiencing more of this love. We're told about how [REDACTED] became friends with each one, but we don't get to actually see much of these characters and the way [REDACTED] interacts with them. There are a few conversations, but these are not enough for the reader to connect with these characters. If the reader is able to connect with the characters, they will be able to experience this love for themselves. They will be emotionally invested in whether or not [REDACTED] succeeds in his goal.

Weaknesses

There are some things about [REDACTED] that make him unlikable to the point where I have no connection with him, causing me to be uninterested in his story. Despite not having talked to her for years and the unsettling circumstances surrounding her reappearance, [REDACTED] is open to picking up his relationship with [REDACTED] where they left it. The fact that he is constantly pushing away all thoughts of these unsettling circumstances is unrealistic; it does not allow him to react to them naturally or appropriately. [REDACTED]'s persistency to push negative things out of his mind is very frustrating, especially because there is no reason for it e.g. [REDACTED]. He needs to react to these things, and do so in a realistic way.

Another thing that bothers me is that, while he does have passing doubts about [REDACTED], he is open to being considered her best friend again. The first time they actually run into each other, [REDACTED] screams that [REDACTED] is her friend alone and he runs away from her in fear. He also doubts her mental state. The next time he sees her, he screams like a banshee. Yet after that, he's fine with her. He doesn't ask why she followed him. He doesn't question why she yelled at him. He just acts a little annoyed that she's at his house when all he wants to do is lie down. It doesn't make sense for him to brush this all off. It's been years since they last saw each other, they haven't had any contact and it would be completely reasonable given the circumstances for him to tell her that he no longer considers her his best friend.

Antagonist [REDACTED]

Motivation

I'm unsure of her motivation. [REDACTED] isn't opposing her goal in any significant way until he discovers she has [REDACTED]. If he's not opposing her goal, she had no reason to [REDACTED]. She needs her own first plot point, i.e. something that encourages her to make the goal to [REDACTED]. This could be something like [REDACTED] telling her to leave him alone because she's creeping him out and he doesn't consider her a best friend after all those years of having no contact, and then going to see his friends. I'm not even sure why she wants [REDACTED]. The reader doesn't need to be told the whole reason to begin with, but they should have some indication. This will show them what's at stake for [REDACTED] if [REDACTED] succeeds.

Conflict

[REDACTED] other friends stand in the way of [REDACTED] getting what she wants. Her behaviour could push him away. When she tries to eliminate these hurdles, she begins to turn him against her. [REDACTED] wants [REDACTED]. Early on, [REDACTED] should establish that he does not feel the same way about her and go to see his friends. This will cause her to see his friends as something that opposes her getting what she wants and set the goal to [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] is also a conflict, which is something she does not seem to consider. She does not think about the consequences of her actions, even if they involve making it harder for her to achieve her goal. This makes her quite a one-dimensional character.

Weaknesses

She has no qualities that would make [REDACTED] choose to be with her. She also has no subtlety, which could potentially be her downfall. When [REDACTED] asks her to come and hang out with his other friends she reacts with rage that causes [REDACTED] to flee and begin doubting her mental state. It's their first meeting and she is already making things harder for herself. I think it would be interesting to see more manipulative qualities and subtlety in her. You could have her convince [REDACTED], and even the reader, that she is not all bad. Make him actually see being with her as an option, and not one that's unpleasant. This would make her much more interesting, and give the story more tension.

Pacing

[REDACTED] has a disturbing dream about [REDACTED], sees a girl looking through his kitchen window, finds his bedroom window has been forced open and a note from [REDACTED] has been left, finds his window closed, and has an unsettling run-in with [REDACTED] all within the first 2000 words. The scene following their first run-in should be a scene where he reflects on the run-in; however, [REDACTED] appears again and he screams. And then he goes home to reflect, and there she is again. Again, just when you think he is about to reflect while on the phone to [REDACTED], he sees [REDACTED] in his living room. And then again [REDACTED] runs home to think about what happened to [REDACTED], and [REDACTED] is there again. It would be a lot better if you put more reflection scenes in between these action ones. The reader needs to process what's happened, and so does [REDACTED]. Putting space in between these scenes will help [REDACTED] rationalise them and come to the conclusion that maybe he's overreacting, and stop the story feeling like it's moving way too fast.

Appraisal sample 3

Plot

The focus given to ██████'s meeting suggests the job offer is important, which means that you've started the story straight away and not bogged the beginning down with unnecessary scenes. I think this is a great place to start the story; however, I want to point out that because I don't know where the story is headed, I don't know what's relevant and what's not. I want you to be aware of what this first chapter suggests to the reader just in case this new job is actually not important. Giving the reader false expectations can pull them out of the story. Another example of something that may give the reader expectations is ██████'s colleagues' fear of the vice president (p 11). After reading this, I want to know what other people are seeing that ██████ isn't. Is his cheerfulness just a ruse? Is falling for it going to bite ██████ on the ass? As a reader, I now have an expectation that this fact is going to be important later on because it was pointed out when it seemed superfluous, and if nothing comes of it then I will be both disappointed and distracted, two things you don't want your reader to be.

I like that the action starts early and that the attack is foreshadowed, but I did have trouble interpreting ██████'s intentions at first and it took a few readings, with and without chapter 2, to form a conclusion that made sense to me: ██████ is the ██████ and ██████ is the ██████ (suggested by ██████ hearing ██████-members' voices), but the ██████ thought differently and acted accordingly (suggested by their attack on ██████ and her disappearance while little damage was done to ██████ and she was left in the garage). I liked this conclusion once I reached it because it surprised me; however, I'm not sure I've interpreted things correctly. I'm pointing this out because of my uncertainty. If my conclusion is incorrect, the confusion lies in chapter 2 and it may be best to leave this chapter out and introduce the characters after the attack (which makes the attack a surprise for the reader). If it is correct, then it's probably okay to leave things as they are because relevant information will be revealed in future chapters. This could also be the case if I'm incorrect, but have another look at chapter 2 anyway, as it may potentially cause confusion.

Character

I'm sorry to say that I'm finding it hard to like some of the characters.

██████

What does ██████ really think of her lifestyle? She's wondering how her life became so common and boring (1) and thinks her job is dreadfully boring, but takes pride in her work and her less-than-interesting life (2). She then thinks this meeting is sure to spice things up (2). Does she like her boring life or not?

She seems pretty blasé about the meeting. Apart from feeling a little nervous, it's like she doesn't care how the meeting turns out. I can't care about this meeting if she doesn't care about it. She doesn't have any hopes or fears about it. She thinks it's about time she got some recognition (8), but her attitude suggests that would just be incidental and not something she's actually striving for. Giving her something to actively want will encourage the reader to want that with her, forming a connection between story and reader.

In addition, the reader also needs a reason to want the character to get what she wants. To be frank, I don't think [REDACTED] deserves recognition. She's always fixing her staffs' mistakes (8) rather than training them to avoid making them in the first place, which wastes time and resources and allows others to waste time and resources. [REDACTED] is confident enough to talk negatively about her co-workers to her boss without fear of consequences, suggesting either they're friends, which conflicts with the way [REDACTED] was thinking of her subordinates earlier (8), or that [REDACTED] is not respected enough in her superior position for her staff to fear consequences. Or knock on her door. Rather than telling [REDACTED] that she doesn't have time for this conversation, she sits there and listens (9). She discusses her meeting with her subordinates, rather than telling them she will discuss anything that concerns them after she has had the meeting (9). Her staff even spread defaming rumours about her (9). To me it seems that she isn't respected by her staff and colleagues. If you want [REDACTED] to be liked, you need to show that she deserves recognition as much as she thinks she does, preferably through her actions, not through exposition.

[REDACTED] (and [REDACTED])

Readers need to be able to like [REDACTED] as well so that they care about what happens to her, but I found liking her difficult. Not enough happens to make her disappearance matter, and her character isn't developed enough for the reader to feel anything towards her. There just doesn't seem to be much to her.

[REDACTED] is much the same as [REDACTED], and I can't connect with either of them because they aren't realistic to me. I find them both to be immature because while being bubbly or "hyperactive" aren't necessarily bad traits, there's nothing that grounds either of these women. They can be bubbly and charming without screaming (2), pretending to flirt with their friends (3), swinging and slamming doors and dropping into chairs (7) and skipping around the office (10). I'd like to see maturity in these women, just to show that they can act their age.

A way you could show this may be something like adding in a conversation after [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]'s light-hearted "I'm not an adult" conversation where [REDACTED] gets a little more serious and asks if [REDACTED] has considered the possibility of bad news and if they should discuss it. Or she could even mention something "Mr I-can't-manage-to-tie-my-own-shoes-no-wonder-my-wife-left-me" did wrong and how she fixed it, showing professionalism in her job.

[REDACTED]

I do like [REDACTED]; his character comes through well, both through his actions and his dialogue. I really have a sense of who he is, and there's nothing about his character that I find unrealistic.

Dialogue

The dialogue is very stilted in places, which interrupts the flow of the narrative. A lot of the language is too formal and no one seems to speak with contractions, so it's not smooth to read. Try reading it aloud; is this how the characters would really talk?

Description and language

You've clearly thought about the backstory of your characters, which helps to develop them, but there are chunks of exposition that interrupt the flow and aren't engaging. Backstory and characterisation don't need to be revealed all at once, and it could be incorporated in other ways,

such as through dialogue and action. How important is it to mention that [REDACTED] doesn't like wearing bikinis?

A lot of the language is too formal, e.g. "The girls stopped instantly to inspect the area behind them" (6), when just "[REDACTED] threw a half-interested glance over her shoulder" would do, especially considering they're used to odd noises.

There are places where you could do more showing and less telling, e.g. instead of "nervously rubbing her hands together" (10), take out the adverb and show more. Maybe when she's rubbing her hands together she realises they're sweating, which shows her nerves. An example of great description is when you described [REDACTED]'s scar through his facial movement. It created a very vivid image in my head because I wasn't just told that he had a scar on his neck.

Pacing and tension

This excerpt is very rushed. The attack scene is appropriately fast, but everything else is fast as well. You could bring the reader into the scene a little more by incorporating more of [REDACTED]'s senses, and combining them with what she's thinking or feeling (although the trick is to try to make it flow). Create scenes that a reader can sink into, rather than ones that make it feel like they are skimming through.

I also think it would be helpful to add at least another scene in to slow it down a bit and develop the characters a little more before the attack. Perhaps you could add something before the meeting, making [REDACTED] wait longer before having it, increasing her nerves and/or anxiety and thus increasing the tension. In this scene you could show her working so that the reader can get an idea about why she thinks she deserves a promotion. Maybe she's organising some staff training, or settling a dispute between colleagues.

Appraisal sample 4

The [REDACTED] world really interested me, especially the fact that they have their own government and health problems related to being [REDACTED]. I also liked that the story had several different avenues to keep me guessing. [REDACTED]'s scars were of particular interest to me, and it was great that they were introduced so early on. You also raised several other questions that would ensure the reader would keep reading to find answers.

However, I did feel as if the story wasn't complete. I know this is the first book in a series, but I didn't feel as though this particular instalment came to a narrative conclusion.

Writing

The writing was generally good, but the description in the first chapter was a bit excessive, which slowed down the pace of the writing in a scene that should be fast-paced. Try to remove anything unnecessary from action scenes so they unfold at an appropriate pace, e.g. "A *crashing sound* announced the arrival of its pursuer as a terrifying creature hit the roof behind it." could be "A *crash* announced the arrival of its pursuer as a terrifying creature hit the roof behind it." It gets to the point quicker so the story can keep moving forward.

There's also too many eye colour descriptions. I think I was told the eye colour of [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] about a half a dozen times each, which got annoying. Unless it's important to the story, being told once is enough.

The way you've gone about describing [REDACTED] is great. It didn't sound out of place, as it came up in the conversation she has with [REDACTED]. This conversation was also a great way to introduce how [REDACTED].

Introducing [REDACTED]'s scars, however, was a bit jarring: "[REDACTED] [REDACTED]." This sounds odd, as if she's thought 'Oh that's right, I have scars on my body. I'll take a look at them.' It comes across like a forced attempt to draw the reader's attention somewhere that it wouldn't have otherwise gone, which can pull the reader out of the story. A more natural way to introduce this might be comparing her drawings with one of the markings to try to determine whether or not she's drawn it properly.

Sometimes characters snort, sigh or sneer words, which isn't possible. They can snort or sigh before and after saying something and can sneer while speaking, but dialogue tags ("*Blah blah blah,*" **she said**) are restricted to the action of getting the words out (e.g. said, shouted, yelled, cried). These should be corrected, e.g. *She snorted.* "*Blah blah blah.*"; "*Blah blah blah,*" *she said with a sneer.*

Story

Characters

[REDACTED]

As a main character, [REDACTED] should have her own personal goals, motivations and conflicts that engage the reader. Her overall goal is to escape poverty, which is great. She then goes one step further and decides to attempt a relationship with [REDACTED] in the hope that he'll provide for her. You've applied the basic concept of breaking larger goals into sub-goals; however, as I don't know much about what [REDACTED]'s done in the last year, this comes across as her relying on someone else to solve her problems, which doesn't make her likable. Before relying on manipulating someone's feelings in order for them to financially support her, I'd like to see her try to accomplish her goal in

more active ways. Perhaps we can see her applying for better jobs, even if she's underqualified. Perhaps we can see her contact a career adviser. Resorting to having someone else take care of her problems is an unlikable trait so I'm not really sympathetic to her problems, which means I don't really care whether or not she's rescued.

Her goal of getting ██████ to take care of her fails, which is great, but the failure itself isn't really a set back and she gives up way too easily, which is going to push the reader away. An interesting character is active. Not reacting to him putting his arm on her seat can hardly be considered as "the wheels coming off the wagon". It was their first date. She can come back from this failure. She can ask him out again. If she was as desperate as she seems to be, she wouldn't give up based in this.

I like how obsessed she is with drawing her scars; however, I'd like to see it developed a bit further. It's obviously an obsession, but one day she decides she's not going to indulge in it anymore and not enough time passes for me to see her struggle with that, as I don't believe that simply ripping up her drawings is "slaying her dragon". It's not going to stop her from drawing, and not drawing is not going to change her life dramatically because the only way I see it impact her life is by making her late for work. There's potential here for internal conflict, which could get her into tense trouble, which could go a long way in developing sympathy for her and engaging the reader.

Overall, I think the connection between ██████ and the reader needs to be stronger, since she's the linchpin of the story. We need to see her try, fail, and try again to get what she wants. I like her snark and stubbornness, too. The swearing and fantasies about stabbing people in the neck and punching them in the face overshadowed this after a while, so I'd like to see those good and entertaining qualities put more on show.

██████

The only thing I really know about ██████ is that she's adamant ██████ ██████ don't exist. Other than this, I don't know what she's generally striving for in life. If I don't know what she's losing by being dragged into this mission, I can't engage with her on the basis that this whole mission is a huge inconvenience. Her boss has approved her working with ██████ so there can't be much at stake where her job is concerned.

She's almost reduced to nothing except the character who opposes what everyone's doing, which is a huge shame because her job is so fascinating and I think her stubbornness and intelligence could create a wonderfully entertaining and useful character. Giving ██████ her own set of goals, motivations and conflicts could deepen the story and potentially create more conflict and subplots so that the story doesn't feel so short. As it is, her character could be removed and all that would be changed is that the reader wouldn't know of the implausibility of ██████. This contradicts how much page time she received in the beginning of the book and the fact that she was essentially kidnapped to come on this retrieval mission. She needs a greater role in the story in which she can utilise her skills and experience.

Central conflict

The overall goal of the characters is to find ██████, but this goal remains exactly the same throughout the story. The stakes aren't raised, the antagonistic force only shows up once and its motives aren't well defined, and ██████'s kidnapping is the only obstacle the characters have to face throughout the story. Because of this, there's no rising tension, meaning the story starts to fall flat. The middle could do with some fleshing out, particularly showing the reader the disastrous consequences if they were to fail in retrieving ██████.

By the end of the story, I don't feel as though a central conflict was overcome because there was so little involved in it. I felt like what I read was only half of the real story that I would expect to find in the first book of a series.

Plot development

The first chapter was great. It started right in the middle of an action scene and I learnt some important things that told me about the central conflict while still being mysterious, making me want to know what they were talking about, e.g. "... her quick death the trade-off for surrendering the secret she and many others had fought so hard to discover." This is a really important secret that affects a lot of people and is worth dying to discover and protect. When I read this, I wanted to know what the secret was. ██████'s mysterious tattoos are also really interesting, so well done introducing two mysteries right off the bat.

The beginning is divided into many short chapters that, alone, don't push the plot forward. Chapter breaks give the reader a chance to consider whether or not they want to keep reading, so if you have too many back-to-back unimportant chapters, they're going to feel like the plot isn't progressing and might not continue reading. I think you should consider combining the first chapters of each character. For example, all that happens in ██████'s first chapter is that she gets up and takes a shower; thus by the end of the second chapter, the tension that rose in the first is already dying down. Nothing really happens in her second chapter either apart from having a bad day at work.

I liked following ██████ as she went about her daily life treating patients, as I got to know more about ██████ and the health problems they have, which is obviously really important to the plot and is equally interesting. I like the information I received from the interaction with ██████ and I think having this interaction is a great way to explain to the reader about ██████ and ██████; however, there's one plot-irrelevant scene with ██████ after another. Both give out important information, but I'm wondering if the second one with ██████ could be given more plot relevance? It's a little exhausting to read a bunch of scenes that don't push the plot forward. His is over quite quickly, but other than giving information, it seems a little pointless. A scene should be able to both build the setting and push the plot forward, so maybe rather than having this experience with ██████, the information could come up in another way. For example, she could get called away before she's able to help him and his health problems could then be explained while ██████ shouts at ██████ for taking her away from her work. I also think the plot would progress much more smoothly if ██████ and ██████ could be contained in one chapter that ends with ██████ being mysteriously whisked away, as this would give the reader cause to keep reading. Similarly, ██████'s first scenes could be combined and end with him being drugged and kidnapped. The moments when ██████ and ██████ are roped into this mission is when the story really starts, so I'd like to get to this point as quickly as possible.